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# the **desire** for **connection** shame and its many faces

ELSPETH PROBYN

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Elspeth Probyn's book *Blush* poses a fascinating question: how is shame essential to our humanity? We often associate shame with negative feelings or emotions and spend very little time considering how it might be positive or productive force in our lives. Probyn explores this *positive ethos* of shame in her book. And, for me, what is perhaps the most intriguing and central aspect of the book is the question of shame and *interest*—and how this might relate to individual and communal senses of belonging.

Broadly speaking, the idea of interest suggests an engagement and connection with something or someone. Shame as an affective experience sparks an interest—and it is this *interest* that is necessary in human relationships. As Probyn writes:

Interest constitutes lines of connection between people and ideas. It describes a kind of affective investment we have in others. When, for different reasons, that investment is questioned and interest interrupted, we feel deprived. Crucially, that's when we feel shame. That little moment of disappointment—'oh, but I was interested'—is amplified into shame or a deep disappointment in ourselves. Shame marks the break in connection. We have to care about something or someone to feel ashamed when that care and connection—our interest—is not reciprocated. (13)

In this respect, shame indicates a *care* necessary in human relationships. Simply put, shame

means we are *interested enough* to care at a some level—even if that care is not easily articulated, reciprocated or understood. This care can open a field of connection and interest that underscores our everyday lives, and our social and political relationships. This is what distinguishes shame from other ‘negative’ categories of affect and emotion such as guilt and contempt, and presents its productive elements.

Probyn’s writing on this aspect of shame is influenced by writings of the psychologist Silvan Tomkins (and Eve K. Sedgwick’s and Adam Frank’s reading of his work).<sup>1</sup> Shame, according to Tomkins, is the most reflexive of all affective experience, and can be the most toxic as it is an experience of the *self* by the *self*. He writes: ‘Why is shame so close to the experienced self? It is because the self lives in the face, and within the face the self burns brightest in the eyes. Shame turns the attention of the self and others away from other objects to this most visible residence of self, increases its visibility and thereby generates the torment of self-consciousness.’<sup>2</sup>

Shame can manifest as that moment when the eyes are lowered, the head hangs down, and a blush burns across the face. What might be the torment of a shameful experience is the heightening of self-consciousness. Paradoxically, though, the experience of shame suggests an *interest* that enables the possibility of having a relationship with others.<sup>3</sup> It is a direct experience of the self and other in an everyday and cultural sense—it is the most painful and humiliating of experiences, but at the same time, the most essential element in building a community.

Importantly, following this line of argument, Probyn points out how shame may be a more useful mechanism to explore than the guilt and blame that often pervade social and political writing and commentary. As Tomkins argues, shame can be distinguished from guilt and contempt (although the physical characteristics may be similar) and it goes deeper—as it moves between the lines of intrapsychic and interpersonal experience. Shame becomes a vehicle, then, to investigate with *interest* one’s actions, history and mistakes—and the reflexive aspects of shame force a re-evaluation of the self, and a global estimation of how, through memory and historical actions, shame may bring out the possibilities of care. Throughout the book, Probyn explores how shame as opposed to guilt and other negative affects may work in reconciliation, feminist politics, postcolonialism and in the ethics of writing.

To give an example of this, Probyn discusses how feminism can be involved in a politics that feels shame, but can also *actively* provoke shame in others. Indeed, she suggests that there is a ‘moral’ high ground incipient in many forms of political engagements and struggles. She argues one could ‘tentatively distinguish between a politics resulting from feeling shame and a politics that actively seeks to cause shame in those seen as their enemy’. (76) That is, when political engagements seek to shame people—whether it be men or women—who may or may not share the same critical frameworks, this approach leads to resentment, and feelings of guilt that manifest in blame. More importantly, it can foreclose the alternative visions of collective life through the guilt that often

underpins a moral political approach, and discourages the desire to be connected to others. In many ways, it shows a lack of interest and lack of care for others—and this is what stifles much of our social and political debate.

This understanding of shame offers a significant intervention into how guilt and blame are played out in political debate and discussion. Without care and interest, what is left is contempt, guilt or loathing that can take the form of negative and uninterested ways of communicating and responding to the world and others. As Probyn suggests, through her own experiences and writing, *interest* provides a connection to a place, history and belonging that mark our corporeal and everyday relations to the world. And this is a more productive way of understanding the deep polemics that exist in contemporary life and political struggles.

One of the aims of Probyn's book is to show how the practice of writing about shame contains the ethical and political terrain of our visions, understandings and engagements in the world. This is a bold attempt, and she takes a risk in writing about the tension between ideas, research and her own experiences of shame and being shamed. As she writes:

The writer is more than a cipher conveying shameful moments. The body of the writer becomes the battleground where ideas and experiences collide, sometimes to produce new visions of life ... (162)

Central to this *battleground* is Probyn's use of narrative as a structuring tool to convey her own stories and the stories of others—and she

retells these stories often through academic and literary sources. This provides the affective and bodily responses that enliven her work and breaks with the often sterile and disinterested writing that can pervade critical research. For instance, by working with a range of writers as diverse as Silvan Tomkins, Pierre Bourdieu, Stephen King, Gilles Deleuze, and Primo Levi, she argues how the ethics of writing involves individual, critical and cultural aspects of shame that can be productive. Moreover, as the prevailing trend in academic research is to 'denunciate' other perspectives and models of thought, by working with diverse writers and often competing and self-enclosed disciplines such as psychology and cultural criticism, sociology and science, she provokes, stimulates and invents 'contact zones'. In this way, her writing is mindful of the reflexive and self-conscious aspects of shame, and being shamed, and the ethical questions that pertain to this.

But at crucial moments throughout the book, Probyn's movement between personal narrative and critical analysis falls short. It seems that shame becomes a trope to structure her narrative and connecting themes and stories. Thus, as a reader, I sometimes find that the deep resonance and paradox of shame in Tomkins' sense—the self-reflexiveness of shame and the interest and desire to be connected—is lost. As a result, what structures her interest and ethics of shame is the same battleground and tension she struggles with. Although *Blush*, as she states, is the most personal and also the most objective book she has written, it often remains too personal an account and testimony, rather than provoking the objective space of otherness that

is her *desire for connection* in writing about shame and its many faces.

Nevertheless, Probyn raises important questions and situates shame in a more complex field of study. Her book broadens and deepens the understanding of shame, and its essential role in human life. It shows a generosity and vigorous intellectual enquiry that opens the path for other serious investigations into shame. Her book is more than timely—as we live in a guilt-ridden and shameless world—that needs a real injection of care and a keen social and political interest.

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1. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (eds), *Shame and its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1995.
  2. Silvan Tomkins, *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness*, vol. 11, Springer Publishing Company, New York, 1963, p. 133.
  3. Interestingly, this also evokes the question of shame in interspecies relationships—for instance, my late dog experienced great shame because of her interest in me. See Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, John Murray, London, 1872. Darwin provides an interesting starting point for understanding interspecies relationships, and shame. Probyn, following Tomkins, acknowledges the remarkable work of Darwin, and his documentation of the emotions in humans and animals.